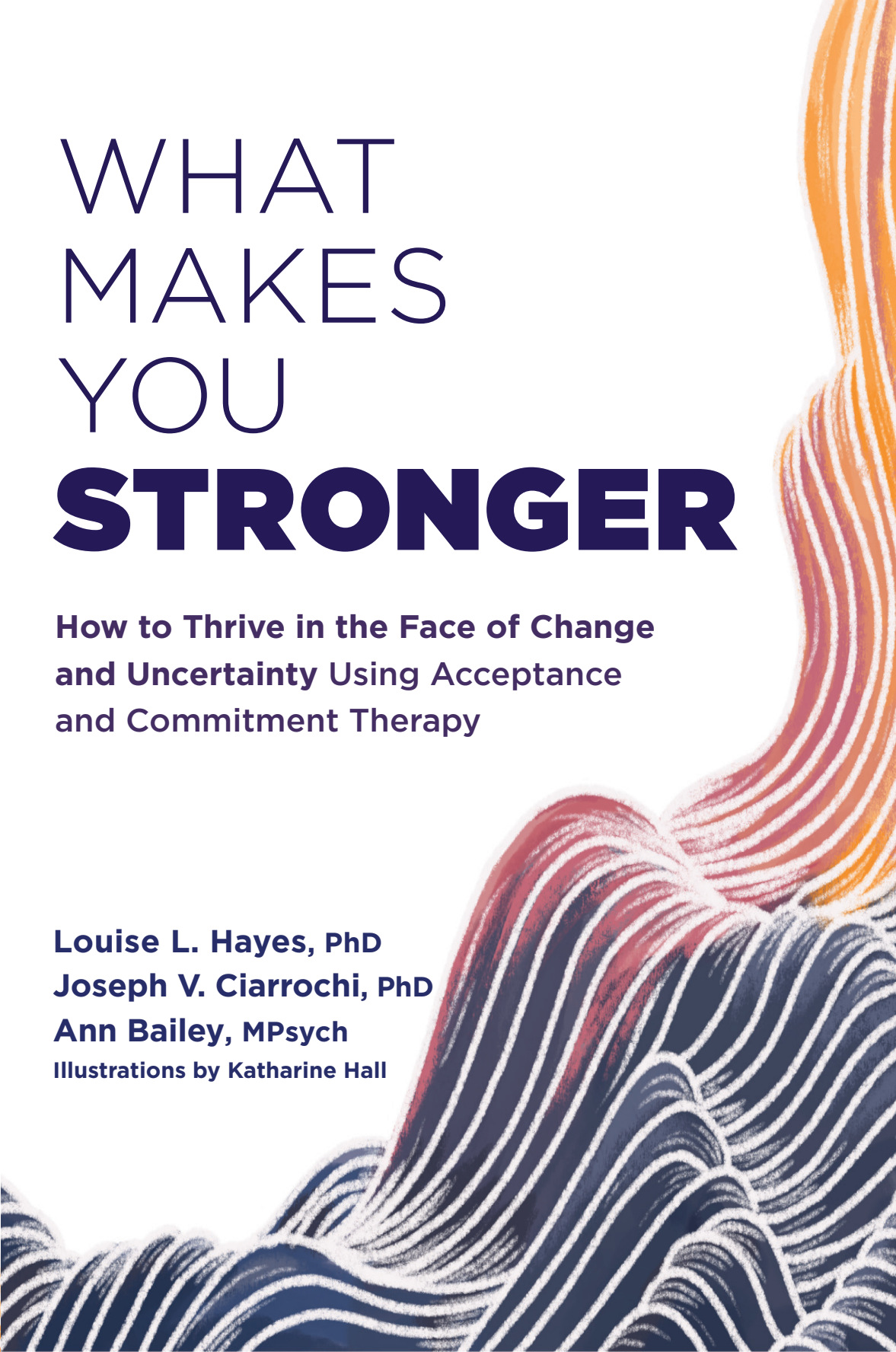


# WHAT MAKES YOU **STRONGER**

How to Thrive in the Face of Change  
and Uncertainty Using Acceptance  
and Commitment Therapy

Louise L. Hayes, PhD  
Joseph V. Ciarrochi, PhD  
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Illustrations by Katharine Hall



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## Chapter 8

# YOUR ACHIEVING SELF

The key to success is stepping up. Step up over and over and you will achieve.

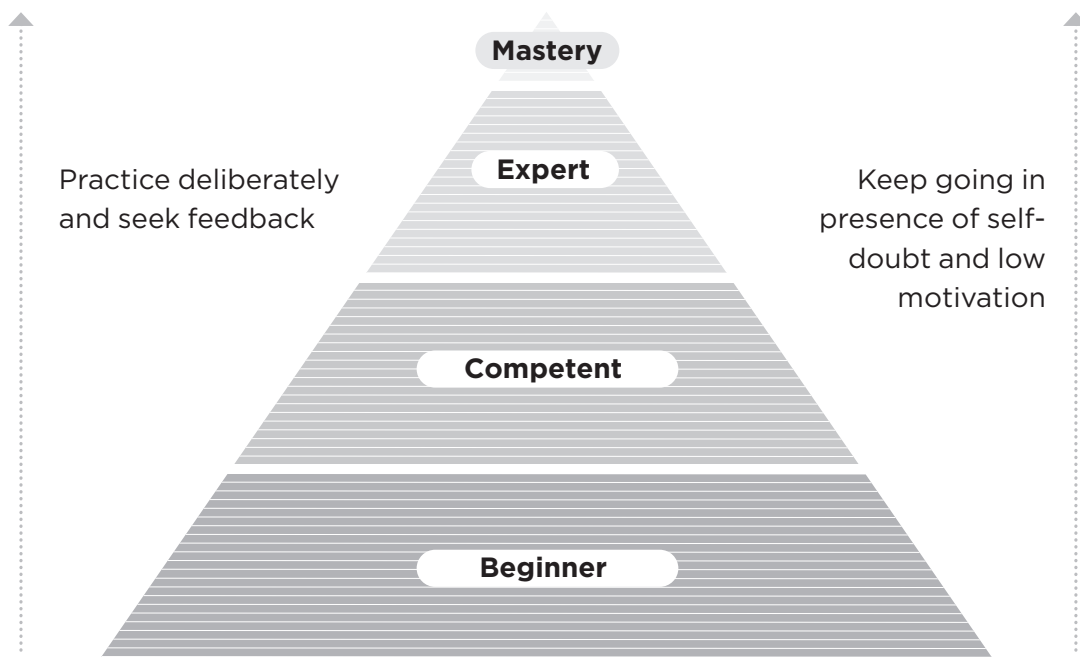
It's time to dream big. What would you love to improve or master? Do you want to get better at your career, a sport, a hobby, business, creating, building, programming, leadership, or something else? Just imagine that anything is possible. This chapter is a road map on how to reach your peak potential.

The previous chapters have been preparing you for this moment. In chapter 5, you learned to leave your protective shell behind and let yourself feel vulnerable so that you can grow a bigger life. Chapter 6 showed you that self-limiting labels don't need to stop you from growing. In chapter 7 you learned that you can sustain your motivation through compassionate practices rather than critical self-talk. Now you are ready to grow beyond what you might have thought possible.

## The Path of Improvement

If you're ready to improve, this chapter will help. Regardless of what you choose to focus on, your journey of achievement passes through several stages: you'll start at beginner, move to competent, then expert, and finally master.<sup>1</sup> You can choose to stay at the beginner or competent level for activities you don't value investing more time in. However, we don't want to stay at the competent level for things that are deeply important to us. We would like to achieve mastery, but often don't. This isn't because we lack specific genes or talents; it's because becoming a master at something requires slow, steady, and hard work, often over years. And we come up against two big obstacles to achieving mastery:

1. We have competing demands, like life and other responsibilities.
2. We let our advisor run our life, focusing on immediate problem solving and not on the things we care about.
3. We want to avoid the difficult feelings that come with practice.



Consider what you want to get better at and how much time and effort you want to put into it. We'll show what each step on the journey might entail.

**Beginner** is where you have little knowledge or skill. Your advisor might not like you being here. *You look stupid playing that instrument*, it might say. When you listen to your pessimistic advisor, you often don't start the achievement jour-

ney. You'll need to redirect your advisor when you make a start. At the beginning level, things will seem difficult and sometimes overwhelming. For example, if learning a new sport, you may struggle to do the essential steps. Everything may seem unnatural or confusing. If learning a new language, you will struggle with every word, and whole sentences may overwhelm your understanding.

**Competent** means you have some experience and can use your knowledge to focus on what is essential. Things will have become easier, and you might want to settle here: getting good work evaluations, playing your sport or musical instrument at a competent level, cooking pretty good meals, being a decent enough leader or a reasonable programmer, or being able to speak passable Spanish. Maybe this level is enough for most things you do. But is there some passion you want to take further?

**Expert** level is achieved through many years of hard, deliberate work. Expert means you can perform at your chosen task with ease and skill. The expert guitar player knows instantly where their hands need to go for each chord. The robotics engineer knows how to design new systems. Language experts speak fluently and understand instantly. The expert chef knows which ingredient a dish needs without having to consult a cookbook. Expert performance can seem magical because it appears so effortless. Remember, though, that effortless performance is built upon years of effort.

**Master** is the highest level in a person's chosen area. They might be concert pianists, business entrepreneurs, renowned authors, CEOs, or professional athletes. Becoming a master often takes a lifetime of devotion.

If you choose, you can travel the path to expertise. Maybe you won't be a professional, but you can become more skillful and increase your sense of accomplishment. Along the way, maybe you'll decide to go to the master level of your chosen activity. Who knows? There is only one path to find out.

1. **Identify what to work on**, which skill you want to develop.
2. **Develop a deliberate practice plan**, one that involves pushing yourself out of your comfort zone.
3. **Prepare yourself for fear, self-doubt, and low motivation**, as anyone who has reached the pinnacle of their discipline has felt self-doubt and unmotivated, and likely continues to have these feelings. They do not let this stop them.

## Step 1. Identify What to Work On

The first step is to decide what you want to achieve. Think about an activity in which you want to improve. Here are some activity domains to consider:

- » Interpersonal (relationships, public speaking, teaching, coaching, community building)
- » Intrapersonal (meditation, spirituality, journaling, reading, self-compassion)
- » Physical (sport and exercise)
- » Intellectual (learning something new, mastering some intellectual domain)
- » Technical (dance steps, building things, fixing things)
- » Creative (visual arts, music, singing, cooking, gardening)
- » Industry (running a business, managing people)
- » Humanitarian (starting a charity, volunteering)

Now consider if the activity you want to work on speaks to how you want to live. If value underpins your action, then you are more likely to have sustained motivation over time.

*Abandon empty busy-ness;  
put your efforts into life-enhancing activities.*

Think about the activity you want to strive for and then answer these questions:

1. Does the activity reflect the sort of person you want to be in your heart (not in appearances or social status)?
2. Is the activity a passion?
3. Does the activity bring meaning or purpose to your life?
4. Does the activity let you connect with others?
5. Is the activity in harmony with other aspects of your life?

To have sustained motivation, you'd want to answer yes to most of these questions. You don't want to put time into something that doesn't matter much to you; that's a certain path to demotivation.

## **Step 2. Develop a Deliberate Practice Plan**

You may be stuck in the modern dilemma. Like most people, you probably feel overwhelmed by life sometimes. Too many obligations, too little time. Consider for a moment whether your energy is being directed to what you love. If the answer is no, it's time to change.

### **| Change the paradigm: Make time count.**

Consider this analogy: Bishop is a competent chess player and spends thousands of hours playing speed chess, but his improvement lags. Bishop gets frustrated and thinks he needs some luck; maybe changing his name to King might help. Maybe that will help him win some games. Alas, random wishes won't allow him (or you) to improve. Bishop's problem is that merely playing or wishing doesn't work. Playing speed chess is comfortable and easy for him, but he doesn't study his errors. He plays a game, and then dashes to the next game.

To improve, he'll need to enter his discoverer space. Bishop needs to leave his habit zone, deliberately exposing himself to challenges he can't always handle. The habit zone is comfortable, but nothing much happens there. When out of the habit zone, Bishop will get feedback from his failures and setbacks as well as his wins. Research shows folks like Bishop will need to struggle to solve complex chess problems over and over, and lose games at chess tournaments over and over.<sup>2</sup> Five hours practicing in the uncomfortable zone is likely equal to twenty hours of comfy speed chess. Quality engagement is more critical than quantity.<sup>3</sup>

Over to you.

Consider the thing you'd like to achieve.

Now, engage in deliberate practice by using these three steps:

1. ***Embrace the unknown.*** To improve, you often need to do something new. For example, if you want to enhance work performance, you might seek a work coach. Or, if you're going to be more social and build your friendships, perhaps you'll investigate moving from online

tai chi classes to joining a local group. Stepping out of that habit zone into the unknown is growth. It sets your energy spinning toward value.

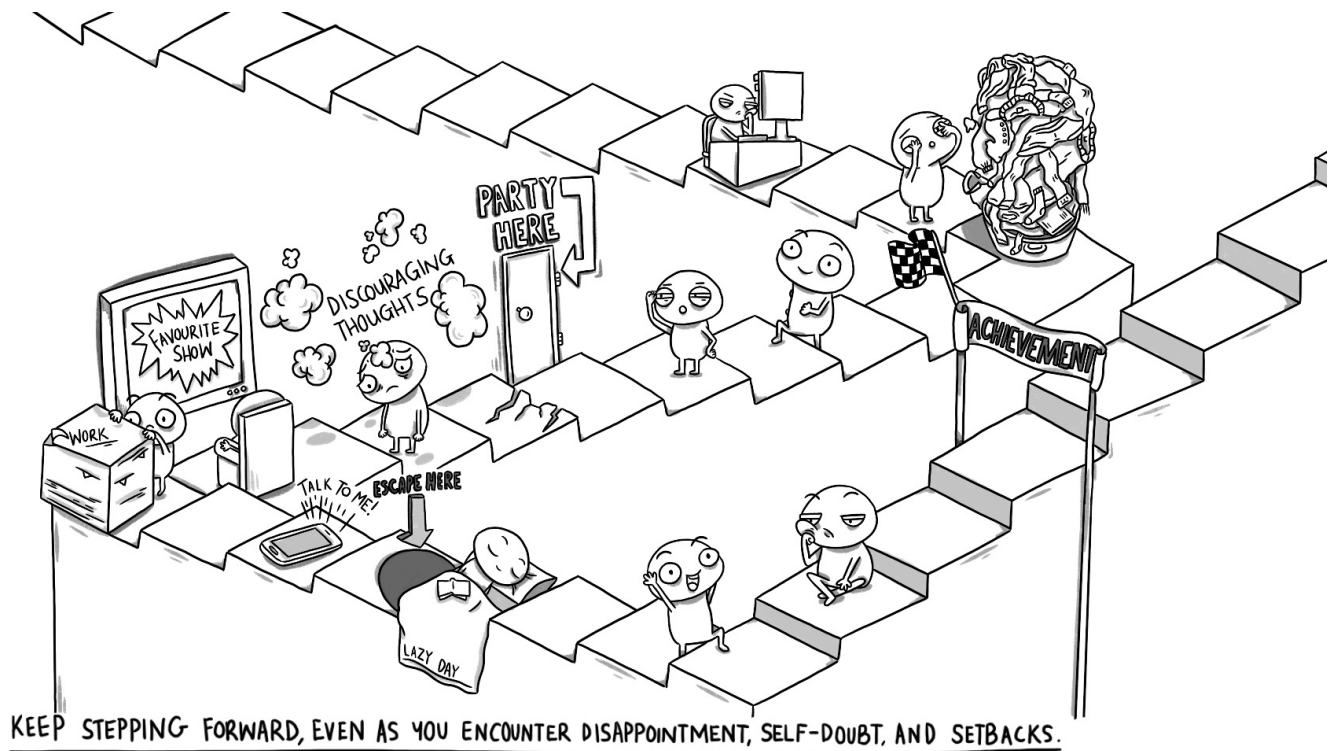
2. **Step boldly into life.** Next, set some goals that link to action. Consider what steps you'll do to develop your skill. Set goals in the sweet spot,<sup>4</sup> that's not too easy but not so hard that you feel frustrated, get burned out, or become injured. For example, if approaching a mentor feels too big, you might join an online discussion group in your field. If learning guitar, choose music that challenges you, something you can't *do in your sleep*, but not so hard that you get discouraged. Only you can decide where the challenge sweet spot is.
3. **Learn from your mistakes.** Pay attention to your results and measure how you are improving. For example, if you're joining a tai chi class, notice whether you're out of step, adjust your moves, and ask for feedback. If you are learning guitar, record yourself performing something now and record yourself a few weeks later. Listen to where you are improving and where you need to improve. Seek feedback from a teacher. Remind yourself that growth is about embracing feedback, not beating yourself up.

### **Step 3. Prepare for Fear, Self-Doubt, and Low Motivation**

Mistakes will make you stronger. Assume that whenever you leave your habit zone and enter your discovery space, you will make mistakes. Deliberate practice isn't easy. You will lose your confidence, and your advisor will throw self-doubt at you. Remember, mistakes are the whole point of discovery. Self-doubt doesn't have to get in your way.

The next illustration shows you how achievement occurs. Each step up represents an improvement from deliberate practice or study. You can see that with steps toward achievement, your thoughts and feelings will change. Some days you'll feel confident, other days unmotivated or insecure. You don't have control over feelings and thoughts because when you push yourself to get better, you increase the risk of mistakes and setbacks, and therefore self-criticism. The thing you have control over is your practice. Keep showing up on your life path and have faith that deliberate efforts will elevate you. Keep moving your hands and feet toward your goals.

When fear and self-doubt get in the way, remember to return to the present moment. The most straightforward instruction in sports is, *Keep your eye on the ball*. There's a variation of this in most activities: *Really hear the music*



as you play it, or forget the past game, focus on now. When we learn new things or try to improve, we often have a head full of instructions—and we neglect to focus on the task. When you are not in the present, you become insensitive to the demands of the situation. You are also less aware of feedback and less able to learn. Thus, a critical skill for excellence is catching yourself when you have left the present moment and then returning.

It is said that breathing recalibrates the rhythm of the universe. As Timothy Gallwey writes in *The Inner Game of Tennis*, “When the mind is fastened to the rhythm of breathing, it tends to become absorbed and calm. Whether on or off the court, I know of no better way to begin to deal with anxiety than to place the mind on one’s breathing process.”<sup>5</sup> The simplest way to return to the present is to ground yourself by slowing your breath (see the exercises in chapter 3).

Breathing can help with achievement stress too, but the aim isn’t to eliminate the stress. That’s impossible. Attempting to eliminate all stress is another form of retreating to the habit zone. Learning, competing, and stretching yourself out of your habit zone comes with a certain amount of stress. You stress your body when you do resistance training or practice something difficult. You stress your mind when you are struggling to learn something new.

You’ll also need recovery time after a stressful practice. So make sure you take rest days, engage in relaxing activities, eat well, and get enough sleep.

■ There is no success without stress.

Achievers pay attention to stress in their bodies and detect when beneficial stress is tipping into harmful stress. Signs of too much stress include fatigue, irritability, agitation, feeling burned out, or seeing your outcomes decline. If this happens, it is time to rest.

■ Stress and rest are two sides of the same coin.  
■ You need both to achieve.

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## Use Your Advisor as a Training Partner

Your advisor plays a role in your achievement. You need rules and instructions to tell you when you are beginning—*Stand behind the line when serving and return the ball inside the lines*. Your advisor can then internalize these rules to remind you, *Keep the ball inside the lines*. Once you improve, your advisor is no longer needed because you'll develop habits. It's like learning to drive a car. When you're a learner, there are multiple instructions all at once—look left, look right, indicate, then accelerate while slowly releasing the clutch—but once you have mastered driving, you barely think of these instructions. (Until you try teaching a new driver and realize how complicated it is.)

Once you become skilled, you increasingly get into a *flow state*, where you are absorbed in the task. A dancer in flow state does not need their advisor to say, *Left foot first, then point your toe*. They do it intuitively. These can become blissful moments in life, stepping into the flow and being present with an activity you value, with your advisor staying silent.

There is sometimes tension with your advisor and achievement. Your advisor is often helpful, but it can also interfere with complex behaviors. Let's take a look at Ann's example of when her advisor got in the way of her achievement.

I spent three years studying acting. After two years and playing several smaller roles, I was cast as the lead. I was excited but nervous. Like many creative or performance roles, I needed to be fully in the moment to be authentic and "real" on stage. So, the pressure was on. It was a weird paradox. In front of a paying audience, full of all my family, friends, and teachers who were assessing me, I had to let go of control. However,

my advisor had other ideas. To protect me from the threat of failure, it decided to feed me instructions on exactly how to “let go”: it reminded me to “be spontaneous,” “listen authentically,” and “look surprised.” It was a disaster. I was robotic, artificial, and a failure on stage. My advisor’s attempt to control my spontaneity ended up destroying it. Unfortunately, I never got another shot at playing a lead role after that. I still feel such shame when I recall this. But I’ve learned to not always let my advisor be in charge.

There are at least two instances where your advisor, or self-talk, is not useful for achievement. First, some things are too complex to put into words and are better understood through your body and practice memory than your self-talking advisor. Second, your advisor can harm achievement by focusing on task-irrelevant things.<sup>6</sup> During an activity, the last thing you want to do is worry about a future play or some past mistake. Peak achievement requires 100 percent focused energy.

This brings us back to those basic advisor steps in chapter 2.

1. **See it.** Notice when your advisor is helping *and* when it is distracting you or undermining your performance. If it is not helping, then go on to step 2.
2. **Redirect it, rather than resist it.** There is no need to fight your advisor or control your thoughts. Instead, shift into your noticer by pausing and taking a slow exhale. Gently shift your attention back to the task. Then move to the third step.
3. **Rule it (with rules of thumb).** Some self-talk *may* be useful in your quest to build expertise.<sup>7</sup> Your self-talk should focus on the present moment, not dwell on past mistakes or future outcomes. For example, it would probably be unhelpful to tell yourself, *Don’t keep making the same dumb mistakes*. This shifts energy away from the present, where it is most needed. Make sure your advisor statements work for you. Here are some examples, but remember to create your own unique rules. Practice self-talk that is useful *to you*:

**Increase motivation**—You can do this! Hang in there. Remain strong.

**Increase acceptance of hard experiences**—Self-doubt is a normal part of getting better.

**Suggest effective strategy**—Slow down and breathe (when rushing). Stay calm.

**Get into the present moment**—Focus on this step.

**Focus on particular skills**—Hit with more topspin.

**Use when-then expressions**—When I am feeling tired, then I will push one more repetition, and then stop.

## Practicing to Achieve

The practice steps in this chapter will help you stay in balance as you work toward your goals. Practice keeping yourself on an even keel, neither overchallenged nor underchallenged.

### Achieving self

Identify what to work on and link it to value.

Deliberate practice: Embrace unknown, take bold action steps, learn from mistakes, balance stress and rest.

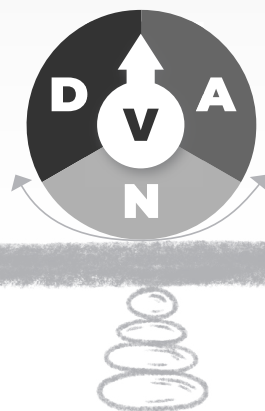
Use noticer to focus and advisor as your training partner.

#### **Over-challenged:**

Challenges too hard, high stress, too little rest, challenge not value driven.

#### **Under-challenged:**

Challenges too easy, stop striving whenever feel doubt or unmotivated, avoid leaving comfort zone.



## **Change happens—here's how to face it, and grow stronger in the process!**

Change comes in many forms: relationships start or end, your career goes from satisfying to unsatisfying, and your life shifts from calm to chaotic. Change can be slow, or it can happen instantly, causing your world to come crashing down. Change is scary, and you might try to

**“If you can learn to be more psychologically flexible, your life will change. Like a flashlight on a pathway, this book will help make that journey clearer.”**

**—Steven C. Hayes,**  
originator of ACT, and  
author of *A Liberated Mind*

avoid it. But while avoiding change can provide short-term relief, eventually your struggle can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression. Fortunately, there is an alternative to avoidance. You *can* face change and transform how you respond to it. You can even harness change to become stronger.

In *What Makes You Stronger*, you'll learn how to apply the powerful DNA-V model (Discoverer, Noticer, Advisor, Value, and Vitality) to your life, and increase your resilience and ability to reach your full potential. A potent blend of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and positive psychology, DNA-V will show you how to manage uncertainty, adopt healthy mental habits, and reduce stress. Ready to start your journey toward a more vital life? This book will help guide you, step by step.

### **Use the simple 6-step DNA-V approach to:**

- ✓ Create and explore to expand your world
- ✓ Use feelings and body intuition to navigate change
- ✓ Break free from self-defeating thoughts and habits
- ✓ Discover meaning and purpose
- ✓ Let go of resentment
- ✓ Build strong and caring social connections

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